“The possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility.” Evaluate this claim.

Interpreting the exact meaning of the title question can be quite tricky. I have come up with two interpretations that are quite different from each other. If taken in literal terms you could say that the question is asking you to discuss how having certain knowledge come with making ethical decisions. However if looked at differently you could also say that the question is asking you to discuss how the knowledge you posses decides your ethics and moral principles according to how this knowledge is used. The key terms in the question are Possession; when you control, own or have something, Ethical; relates to your morals and how you deal with them and Responsibility; having a duty of doing something. Personally I believe that the way in which knowledge is dealt with depends on the situation and circumstances a person is put into which then leads to them either following their beliefs (morals) or emotions. People may have different perceptions of situations however that are also based on an individual’s beliefs, emotions and past experiences. The knowledge issue I have encountered is ‘To what extent do ethics and morals affect the way in which knowledge is used or expressed and do we have to impart the knowledge we have gained?’ Decisions are not always made based on morals and sometimes they are considered only to an extent. People always have the choice whether to share their knowledge or not and if so then how? The Areas of Knowledge (AOK) that will be covered in this essay are Ethics, Religion, History and Natural sciences. The Ways of Knowing (WOK) that will be acknowledged are Emotion, Perception and Reason.

Our ethics play a big part in the decisions we make over certain things. The usual ‘is it right? Or wrong?’ questions are held up against us however in fact there are many things that could influence our ethical values. For example, if you witnessed your friend stealing money out of a bag you would be torn between the choice of either telling the individual that your friend had stolen from their bag or instead simply ignoring it so your friend doesn’t get into any trouble. Reporting what your friend had done could result in losing the friendship and this could then be used to reason why you should just let it go. This would be known as the fear of punishment argument from the self-interest theory which is self explanatory. However if Kant’s theory is applied which states that the motive behind the action is what counts more, then maybe it would be wiser to report what had been done as well as warn your friend about it. On the other hand, if you had seen a stranger steal, or saw something suspicious and you intuition told you that a certain individual had stolen something you are more than likely to not hesitate to report the crime. This shows how emotion plays a big role when making decisions even if we try and avoid it; emotion becomes reason; emotion is used as a WOK.

Nonetheless there are limitations to this. Emotions can make someone ‘blind’ (in literary terms) and decisions are made that may seem right for the time being or maybe in spite of knowing the truth you may choose to hide it leading to long-term consequences. For instance if you were to testify against your husband and you had witnessed him commit that crime, the thought of losing him; especially if you have kids) would be terrifying and so you could choose to cover up what had actually happened. You know this is wrong or it may seem to be what is best for your family at the time, yet your husband is released and continues to commit the crimes he did; maybe even worse. Therefore in ethics, morals would only affect how knowledge is used or expressed if emotions do not take over the mindset and decisions are thought through carefully.

Secondly we could look at natural sciences as an AOK. Let’s say for instance that a scientist made a new discovery. He/she would have to carry out many experiments and come up with an explanation of how to prove that what has been discovered is correct. This results in him/her having to make the decision as to whether enough proof has been gathered to reveal this discovery and make people believe in it as if wrong information is provided problems could arise. Until today there are debates about certain discoveries simply because every scientific theorem is correct until it can be proven to be incorrect. In some cases people provide false information in order to gain money and fame. Therefore, in science, morals would only affect the way in which knowledge is used depending on the intentions of the scientist. Another example is that a patient is in need of an organ transplant with the only other option being to turn on the life support, however their religion does not agree with organ transplants. The doctor and the patient’s family have a choice as to whether to follow their ethics and/or religion and deny the organ transplant or follow their emotions and go ahead with it obviously because they would like the patient to survive. This would be a very hard decision to make and how religious the family are would have an impact on it. If they were to follow their emotions and agree to the transplant they would be ethically wrong in terms of their religion. In other words it could be that a sin is committed. For some, going against religion would not be an option and so they would choose to switch off the life support. Then again this might also be considered ethically wrong as everyone as a right to live or take their chances of survival.

Religion, also being an AOK, tends to serve the purpose of a guide or a way of life for us. You cannot say one religion is correct and the other is not as different religions have different perceptions of how things should be carried out. With what you are taught from this, it is considered your (ethical) responsibility to act upon it in order to lead a peaceful life. Let us consider the following situation. In many religions it is said that it is preferable if not compulsory that an individual marry someone from the same religion. If despite knowing this, a person decides to involve themselves with someone from a different religion, they would have not stayed true to their religion therefore not used their knowledge wisely (chosen to ignore it). This would be considered ethically wrong by many people of the society. A limitation to this argument would be that there are a few odd people who might not be so religious or maybe atheist and so they would not think it is ethically wrong. In fact their argument would be that if two individuals are in love they have every right to spend their lives together. So in this case ethics and morals would affect the way in which religious knowledge is used depending on how religious and individual is as well as how much they are in love.

‘To what extent do ethics and morals affect the way in which knowledge is used or expressed?’ In conclusion, I believe the answer to the knowledge issue has been fairly obvious. In all areas of knowledge discussed; ethics, religion and natural sciences; the extent of the effect of morals on the way knowledge is used depends on the situation that has arises and the individuals perception (way of knowing) of it. If thought is put into decisions that are to be made and all aspects and perspectives are considered then it is more likely that ethical responsibility is taken and ethical values or morals are considered. So now we can bring up the question that what exactly is ethical responsibility? Well based on what has been discussed above I can say that ethical responsibilities are moral rules/values that are generally accepted as good practices and are shown in the actions carried out by an individual. The limitation to this would be the fact that everyone has different beliefs and perceptions towards certain things and the same emotions are not always felt. We can only generalize morals based on ethical relativism. But if so then how can you decide what is ethically right or wrong? If everyone is entitled to their own opinions or morals then how can any decision ever be classified as right or wrong? Who decides what people should know? Doesn’t everyone have the right to know everything? Do we have to impart the knowledge we have gained? We may or may not have answers to these questions. But some depend entirely on an individual themselves.